

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church Freeland WA. 11/12/17 Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Amos 5:18-24, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

Dreary and depressing – that's how today's reading begin. Or, perhaps, frightening?! Amos' flame-thrower language overwhelms his appropriate point; the psalmist could begin by saying "shoot me now, life's not worth living" and Paul mis-states successive Christian realities in an effort to soothe his congregation's fears. It takes today's gospel passage to rescue us!

Matthew shows Jesus centering on a wedding! What's not to like about a wedding?! Have you ever noticed that Jesus always talked about things that were within the experience of his listeners? Everyday human experiences, like weddings and funerals, family gatherings and meals, the stresses of everyday living and joys of companionship. He did that – he talked about things everyone could recognize and understand – as a way of helping them grasp the things they didn't understand.

Just the other day I was wondering what Jesus' stories might be about if he were alive today – if his 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judean ministry were instead a 21<sup>st</sup> Century north American ministry. No doubt there'd be stories about how smart phones and social media are damaging to real, meaningful relationships; parables about the positive consequences that flow from prioritizing selfless living over against self-centered greed.....and so on! We'd probably give them names, the way we've given Jesus' original parables names – "The Good Illegal Immigrant," "The Fundamentalist and the IRS agent," "the generous industrialist" .....

Today's gospel passage is a case in point. How many weddings have you been to where the bridesmaids (if they're still called that!) actually carry oil lamps?! For that matter, what wedding today would have it as accepted practice that the bridesmaids are the ones designated to escort the bridegroom to the wedding?!!

Jesus' story only makes sense in a 1<sup>st</sup> Century context, where the highpoint of the marriage ceremony was when the groom, accompanied by his relatives, went to the family house of the bride to transfer her to his home. That's where Jesus begins this story. We're all waiting for the bridegroom to return with his bride.

And the "bridesmaids?" That's a faulty translation – change that word for a phrase: "young teenagers"! We all know that most young teenagers are highly responsible, and have for many years been used to planning ahead. They clearly know how to avoid only living in the moment....." NOT! To be fair, though, there are five young teenagers – half the group – who are on top of their responsibilities!

So here are these ten young teenagers, probably the groom's sisters and cousins, and they're waiting for the groom with his new bride to come back to his own house, where both of them will live. That's their role in the wedding – to greet the bride and groom and share in the celebrations. Five of them fulfil their responsibilities; five of them flunk out! As a result of their lack of planning they miss the celebration!

So what are some of our take-aways from the parable? What do, what can, Jesus' words mean for us?

1. The kingdom of God is coming. There's no "if" here, no "but." We have no vain hope, there's no false promise.
2. It **will be** a celebration. When God's reign comes in its fullness, it will never be mistaken for something that's anything other than immensely joyful, **always** a celebration.
3. The young teenagers – thoughtful and foolish both – are all automatically invited – and so are we – thoughtful and foolish both. At the wedding banquet there's no guest list to show who's "in" and who's "out." The rich inclusiveness of God's kingdom is on full display.
4. Some sort of strategic planning is a good idea! As the parable of the workers in the vineyard – the one where everyone's paid the same amount no matter what time they were hired to work – as that parable says, entry into the kingdom isn't predicated on how much or how little you've worked, only that – when offered the opportunity – you actually have worked. When you come to the All Parish Dinner, and place your commitment cards on the altar, you're participating in our strategic planning. We would be "foolish bridesmaids" indeed, if we didn't work to insure the future of this place and its orderly and efficient functioning, so that it can be a platform from which we launch our individual and congregational ministries to the world outside our doors.
5. Any strategic planning shouldn't be "long range"! The bridegroom was due that night, not 6 months – or 5 years – hence! In our world, things change so quickly that the idea of "long-range planning" is an oxymoron! Back to the All Parish Dinner: based on what you pledge we will put our annual budget together. What we'll do is to try and anticipate, as best as possible, the expenses we're likely to face in the coming year, but to do so with the understanding that such planning has to be fluid. We can only do that if you tell us what you are planning to commit to this community, so that we can advance the work given us by God to do in this place, on this island, at this time.
6. Lastly, what we look forward to **will be** a celebration. **WAIT!** I said that! It can't be said enough! We are living in a world where – at the moment, anyway – we're a little short on celebration. Perhaps that's because what hope we have for the future has been dimmed by the present we're experiencing. It's important to remember that the bridegroom IS coming; the banquet IS happening; the celebration WILL take place. And it will be the sooner, the richer, the more joyful if we embrace its reality!

Let's do all of that – and let's especially celebrate! It can be – should be – will be – be a celebration that can act as a launching pad for 2018!